



Sustainability, Interculturality and holistic Well-being

The three pillars of Life Skills Education

Juan Camilo Román Estrada

Lokaverkefni til BA-gráðu í alþjóðlegum menntunarfræðum

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Abstract

This essay aims to contribute to integral understanding of the possibilities that life skills education can bring in the arena of education, both formal and informal. Life skills education is presented as the process for guiding people in the cultivation of an original and healthy lifestyle in harmony with the actual world.

Holistic Well-being, Sustainability and Interculturality, are presented as the three pillars of life skills education. These pillars are discussed in context with contemporary issues concerning well-being as a lifestyle choice, cosmopolitan citizenship and environmental awareness. It is argued that by working with these three pillars in life skills education, students can gain important tools for them to take responsibility for individual, social and environmental well-being. Additionally the author provides a practical program for practitioners about how to use the ideas proposed in the text.

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Introduction

Life skills education is not about instruction, but rather it consists of the conscious experience of discovering together the strengths and limitations, the nature and characteristics, as well as the processes and activities that make human life something meaningful, rich and worthy of the privilege that such a miracle represents. It is about learning to take care of ourselves, getting to know who we are and what the meanings and purposes of our *personal and unique life* might be, as well as finding out the *holistic* guidelines or ways of living that could lead us towards a conscious lifestyle. We can think of '*lifestyle*' as the organic articulation of knowledge and our adaptive responses to the environment, which find expression in habits and practical understanding through actions, thoughts, and feelings: the dynamic structure of the personal self.

The interest for taking care of ourselves is not new in the history of human kind: *"You will see, I will try to show you, how generally speaking the principle that one must take care of oneself became the principle of all rational conduct in all forms of active life that would truly conform to the principle of moral rationality"* (Foucault, 1981, p. 9).

The practice and study of life skills would, additionally, give us practical elements in order to evaluate with a critical spirit the risks that public schooling and the modern educational system hold for the healthy development of the self and the sustainability of our communities. In order to achieve this I believe we must cultivate critical thinking, self-awareness and integral understanding, which will allow the creation of an adequate educational context for transformative learning practices and the construction of learning communities with a commitment to justice, democracy and truth.

This essay aims to contribute to integral understanding about the possibilities that life skills education can bring in the arena of education, both formal and informal, in the contemporary world context where new approaches for education and learning processes are at stake for a change of paradigms -- *social adaptive structures of thought that shape our ways of perceiving,*

interpreting and behaving-- that could greatly improve well-being for all.

„What we need, then, are new „paradigms“ – a new vision of reality; a fundamental change in our thoughts, perceptions, and values.“ (Capra, 1983, p.xviii).

In chapter one I define and analyze the meaning of life skills education and present my personal vision of its components. In chapter two I present a critique of the modern educational system which, based on the universality of schooling, has created a crisis of human resources. I also analyze the values that constitute the dominant world view that we are aiming to challenge through life skills education. In chapter three I define the aim of life skills as transformative learning within a learning community, which at large represents humanity. Finally, in chapter four, five and six, I introduce the concepts of holistic Well-being, Sustainability and Interculturality as the universal paradigms - to be locally interpreted and adapted—that will set the metaphysical ground for an overarching revision of contemporary modes of daily living. Additionally, I present a practical program on life skills education with guidelines for classes.

We should be aware that even with all the knowledge and evidence we have acquired regarding the need for a change of paradigms and for the general adoption of sustainable and more balanced ways of living, there are enormous obstacles that we need to face and the changes needed demand personal compromise and an increasing level of self-consciousness. Actually, one of these principal obstacles is the lack of personal engagement of the common people who persist in the same learned behaviors and resist any intent of change (Murray, 2010, p. 2).

It is general knowledge that as human beings we are born with an unknown set of potentialities that if cultivated through the right conditions may flourish and grow; we are also aware that a good part of our lives -the first twenty years or so- is invested in the formation of a character and the development of capabilities, attitudes, knowledge and skills that will form the dynamic structure of each individual. Willingly or not it is our responsibility to take care of this dynamism and to stay healthy and wise throughout our lives, or, to transform it if necessary with consciousness, will-power and love. **Education in this respect can therefore be described as the experiential process**

throughout which we realize ourselves consciously.

What is Life skills education?

I consider that it is the art and process of guiding people in order that they would be able to design and cultivate an original and healthy lifestyle in harmony with the actual world.

In the principal national curriculum for elemental schools in Iceland (Aðalnámskrá Grunnskóla, 1999) we find the following definition: „*The subject of Life skills is to promote an overall development of the student. It includes among other things, that the student makes a point of cultivating spiritual values, physical health and psychological strength*“ (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007, p. 5) (the translation is mine).

Such definition gives us some very important elements to think about and to keep in mind during the whole body of the present essay. To begin with, it is telling us that life skills education should contribute to the development and process of maturation of the students, and, furthermore, that this maturation implies the whole structure of the students as human beings. But wherein dwells this maturity? The definition goes further by telling us that maturation and overall development consist in the self-cultivation of a valuable spirit, a healthy body and the strengthening of the human soul.

Self-cultivation is a process that people must learn to practice by themselves as their own personal responsibility. It implies the development of awareness, self-control, self-discipline, a caring attention, critical thinking, intercultural competence, and a commitment to justice and truth, through intelligence, love and knowledge. It is interesting to notice that this process of self-cultivation – which is an everlasting challenge for any conscious being-- has been part of human consciousness since time immemorial, as this process can be found in any culture or civilization like Yoga in India; Martial arts in Japan and China; the Art of living of Greeks and Romans; the Shamanic initiations of aboriginals, and so on.

I would like to develop these propositions further because I believe that by doing so we can reach a higher level of understanding and a wider camp of

vision for the three pillars of life skills education that I am proposing.

These three pillars are: Sustainability, Interculturality and holistic Well-being. *Sustainability* is about organic social growing, the cultivation of a conscious relationship with all spheres of nature, making a careful use of all resources of energy. It includes principally developing a relationship with ourselves, self-respect and intra-understanding in order to open ourselves to the world and take responsibility for our influence within the complex environment where our life happens.

Interculturality is about the cultivation of a fruitful and fair dialogue between the different actors in a social ecosystem, increasing the awareness of our mutual inter-independence. It includes a commitment for justice, empathy, and a conscious love for life in general.

Holistic well-being is about the cultivation of an integral lifestyle in correspondence with the multidimensionality of reality and human beings and the necessary care for each one of us, in order to flourish as humanity. It includes self-awareness, self-discipline and mindfulness.

In the booklet „Life Skills Education for Children and Adolescents in Schools“ life skills education is defined thusly:

„Life skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour, that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Described in this way, skills that can be said to be life skills are innumerable, and the nature and definition of life skills are likely to differ across cultures and settings.“ (WHO, 1997, p. 1).

According to such program the main objective of life skills education should be to help children and young people to engage creatively in society and to develop **psychosocial competence** in order to be able to maintain a state of mental well-being *„and to demonstrate this in adaptive and positive behavior while interacting with others, his/her culture and environment“* (WHO, 1997).

In order to reach such an objective it would be necessary to construct and implement a supportive learning environment where life skills could be fostered and encouraged. Such a learning environment can be defined as a **learning community** because it is in the connection with others that life occurs for everybody. It is, therefore, the responsibility of life skills education to foster the

understanding of interrelatedness that each individual develops with the whole social and natural environment, which nourishes them and gives meaning to their lifestyles.

By **learning community** we should understand not only the community within the school, but rather the whole system of society where children and people in general interact. We must include family, work environments and leisure settings because life skills could be a wonderful bridge between these different dimensions where learning occurs. This is very interesting because when we visualize society as a learning community we can break through prejudices and steadfast models, and understand that children can teach and adults can learn and that there is no separation between such dimensions. Moreover, life skills education is based on communication and reflection, which can be strengthened if we allow children and adults, including different backgrounds and cultures, to share their learning experiences and different ways of relating with the issues of everyday life.

The WHO's program (1997) points out some basic and essential skills: decision making-problem solving; creative thinking-critical thinking; communication-interpersonal relationships; self-awareness-empathy; coping with emotions- stressors. Thus, while being general skills, they can be developed and encouraged in a multiple variety of settings and educational fields (WHO; 1997).

Fundamental considerations

To begin with I would like to address the difference in approaches between an educational process assumed to be an instrumental and rational training as the transmission of some established knowledge and the development of some useful skills, especially for industrial and managerial model employment; and another approached as a cultivation, an organic discovering of the potentialities of each unique person and the co-construction of knowledge which can enhance creativity and human flourishing.

I consider it important to make such a difference because both approaches involve a complete set of attitudes, knowledge and relations between

individuals and with their different environments; because even if we can recognize and accept the value that both hold in the social development of individuals, it is important to be aware of the emphasis and different influences that each approach may have regarding the kind of society that we are aiming to build.

When we are instructing our students we suppose that we know how to do it well, what the outcomes are that we are looking for, what is needed or required in order to reach a level of „efficiency“; everything is certain because there is a standard curriculum that must be fulfilled. On the other hand, when we are cultivating ourselves there is always a degree of uncertainty, we really don't know what we are looking for, which is why we need to be patient and to take care all the time; to listen attentively to the responses of our students and to be able to adapt to them rather than enforce an established order so that we might achieve our premeditated expectations. Of course, there should be a curriculum of a kind, but with open guidelines for discovery rather than rigid standardization.

The agricultural attitude toward cultivation implies many qualities that are very important in life skills, especially viewpoints on caring which imply both alertness or mindfulness in our actions and the disposition of relating with others through love, respect and empathy (Noddings, 1992). Also it implies a comprehensive view of human life in great interrelationship with everything and everybody.

Cultivation –an agricultural model of education- is proposed, for example, by Sir Ken Robinson (2010), who in his conference “Bring on the Learning Revolution” sustains that there is a second climate crisis as severe as the natural one, with the same origins, that we need to resolve with the same urgency: the crisis of human resources that comes about because we make very poor use of our talents. Education is one of the biggest causes of this crisis because the tendency is to dislocate many people from their natural talents. Sometimes these special talents, that each and every person has to offer, are not so evident and we must, therefore, create the correct circumstances in order for them to flourish. The educational system should be about creating these circumstances (Robinson, 2010).

Robinson sustains that the educational system is too often based on a fast food model which tends to standardize the students instead of offering a personalized and local approach to the needs of each person. People have very different aptitudes and we need to stimulate the things that each person likes to do, that which awakens passion and feeds the spirit. We must transform the actual industrial model into an agricultural model, because the real aim of education should be **human flourishing**, and this cannot be manufactured. “*The only thing that we can do is try to create the best conditions for this flourishing*” (Robinson, 2010).

We must accept then, that with life skills education and its components, we are aiming for the development of a spiritual education, an education of our consciousness and self-awareness. We are focusing on the cultivation and development of a character and some qualities which, even though every human being has access to, may manifest differently according to personalities and contexts. Therefore, the kind of attitudes, understandings, behaviors, self-knowledge, self-reflection, and lifestyles that we should encourage in our students and in our communities are a matter of reflection and practice of life skills education.

Another important consideration that we must keep in mind is the awareness of the holistic tridimensionality of the human being: body, soul, spirit. The ideas that we hold concerning what it means to be human --which are the characteristics of our being, which are the fundamental dimensions that form our reality-- are fundamental because they determine the way we relate to ourselves and the kind of dynamic structure of knowledge that guides our endeavours and behaviours within society and with our environment.

This awareness of our tridimensionality implies the surpassing of dualism, by the non-dualistic experience of inter-connectedness between these three spheres or dimensions of reality. The dualistic approach is based in the polarization of reality between subject and object - the subject who knows and the object which could be known - but by means of this rationalization of reality, the attitudes of the subjects who know are of superiority and domination before a measurable and manipulable set of objects (human and non-human), with all the consequences that such an approach implies. The surpassing of this polarization

generates the awareness of the dynamic and mysterious relations that happen between the multidimensional and complex subject who knows and the multidimensional and complex object to be known. These relations are what constitute the context and possibility of any conscious experience or relationship between different kinds of phenomena, or rather the place of emergence of the experience of reality which is the integration of the known, the consciousness who knows and the process of knowing.

In the human being this tridimensionality manifests in spirit, soul (mind, psyche) and body:

- A valuable spirit: character, purpose of life, moral virtues such as courage, patience, truthfulness and gentleness. Spirit can be understood as the intuitional experience of transcendence that allows us to find a purpose for our life. The intuition that there are bigger things in us than personality and individual interest.
- A healthy body: the body constitutes the meeting point in the physical world of the different processes that together form our organic structure of reality, the personal camp of perception, and the constant re-actualization of the complex interaction between dimensions and possibilities.
- A strong soul: the mind and psychological processes. The metaphysical space of understanding, memory and interpretation of reality. It consists also in the multiple intelligences that each person has and which life skills aims to cultivate, such as emotional intelligence, relational intelligence, and so on. I recommend the works of Howard Gardner, Reggio Emilia educational approach, and Sir Ken Robinson.

In the life skills program that I am proposing, we will try to explore, analyze and experience how this tridimensionality manifests in any activity, behavior and understanding, with the aim of increasing the consciousness of interrelatedness and integrality of any phenomenon including that of human life. Therefore, we can assume that life skills can be defined as all those skills that allow each person to reach a higher level of consciousness and freedom in the sense of auto-responsibility and self-determination.

Another important feature of life skills education is that it aims not to instruct any theory in itself but rather to use a variety and comprehensive set of

concepts in order to be able to help students efficiently in coping with their personal and local challenges and problematics. This can be achieved through the exploration and actualization of their personal experiences, visions and understandings (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007, p. 5).

It is through the sound interpretation of the experiences of everyday life that this knowledge can become better articulated in a comprehensible wisdom within which our personal lifestyle resonates and harmonizes, thus armoring our students with elements of resistance against the bad habits, oppression and dangers of ignorance and stupidity.

A critic of the modern educational system

Historically, the last part of the twenty century can be defined as a time of disillusion, where the values that have guided the attitudes and actions of Western civilization have lost their validity before a world's panorama that right now is showing an overwhelming number of wounds (physically, psychologically and spiritually) in the natural ecosystems and human's societies. As a result of the implementation and substantial installation over the globe of a state of affairs fruit of the process of industrialization-capitalization-technocratization of the issues of the world –and life in general- which has been an unfortunate result of the so called „project of Modernity“ (Habermas, 1997, p.45).

In this state of affairs, the educational system has played a very important role as the principal instrument in charge of preparing and programming individuals to become efficient and profitable agents at the service of the interests of the dominant power structure. Coming full circle, this same power controls what kinds of knowledge are to be taught in schools:

„those in positions of power are responsible for the assumptions that underlie the selection and organization of knowledge in society“ (Goodson & Dowbiggin, 1997).

As Henry Giroux (1983) points out regarding the hidden curriculum in schools:

„1. Schools cannot be analyzed as institutions removed from the socio-economic context in which they are situated.

2. *Schools are political sites involved in the construction and control of discourse, meaning, and subjectivities.*

3. *The commonsense values and beliefs that guide and structure classroom practice are not a priori universals, but social constructions based on specific normative and political assumptions.* “ (Giroux, 1983, p.46).

To understand the functions of the hidden curriculum, which I see as the set of values and symbols that structure the school space and produce education indirectly (the distribution and organization of walls, the advertisements, the chairs, the playground, and so on) (Eisner, 1994) and, moreover, to analyze how it influences our preferences and criteria of values is an important step in the acquisition and strengthening of a critical spirit.

In this context, life skills education can be illuminated by the works of critical pedagogy in the endeavor to create the conditions for critical thinking and epistemological tools for the struggle for freedom and justice.

„ *...the object of thinking critically is not only against demonstrably false beliefs, but also those that are misleading, partisan, or implicated in the preservation of an unjust status quo.* “ (Burbules & Bank, 1999).

For Paulo Freire (1921-1997), freedom begins by the recognition of a system of oppressive relations, and which place and what roles each one has within that system. This is why he considered that the principal task of Critical Pedagogy is to develop a critical consciousness of the situations of oppression in order to be able to begin a liberatory praxis:

„ *Change in consciousness and concrete action are linked for Freire; the greatest single barrier against the prospect of liberation is an ingrained, fatalistic belief in the inevitability and necessity of an unjust status quo.* “ (Burbules and Berk, 1999).

But I must add that it is part of life skills education to not only encourage such critical consciousness within oppressed or discriminated groups, but to establish a critical understanding of why such conditions of oppression are based on lack of consciousness and soul qualities (the subject of life skills education), and therefore should be transcended by all humanity, regardless of economic classes, in order to evolve towards more wholesome challenges (Buckminster Fuller, 1981).

We can thusly assume that the biggest critique to the model of the modern school system is that it has become an industry of reproduction of certain values and ways of perceiving reality, which modulate individuals into the social structure of domination that controls the production and distribution of goods and desires.

Of course we can recognize also that schools are educational settings that under the right conditions and policies could contribute enormously to the implementation of life skills education and transformative learning practices. However, in order to create such an atmosphere it is necessary that teachers and school's staff, as well as stakeholders, would be able to participate in the life skills endeavor and critical consciousness cultivation. Among the characteristics that could make schools an adequate setting for the practice of life skills –which are the same for the instruction and adaptation into the structure of domination and control-- I consider the following, as suggested by the WHO's program:

- *„the role of schools in the socialization of young people;*
- *access to children and adolescents on a large scale*
- *economic efficiencies (uses existing infrastructure);*
- *experienced teachers already in place;*
- *high credibility with parents and community members;*
- *possibilities for short and long term evaluation“ (WHO, 1997).*

In order to better illuminate the degree of alertness that we should have regarding the modern school system, I would like to recall the critique of schooling that Ivan Illich (1970) developed and that, I believe, is still very strong and meaningful:

„In fact, however, schools are untouchable because they are vital for the status quo. Schools have the effect of tempering the subversive potential of education in an alienated society because, if education is confined to schools, only those who have been schooled into compliance on a lower grade are admitted to its higher reaches. In capital-starved societies not rich enough to purchase unlimited schooling, the majority is schooled not only into compliance but also into

subservience“ (Illich, 1970, p.96).

This sharp consideration implies that in our societies everybody is socially obliged to be schooled during his/her childhood and adolescence, becoming victims of ideologies and practices of control (Deleuze, 1992) that make of the students docile employees or in the „better“ of cases successful agents of reproduction of the status quo, enjoying its benefits.

While promoting the myth of capitalization of success for the better prepared, who are able to afford time of studying and cultural capital, schools create conversely discrimination and the legitimization of failure for those who do not match up to the requirements of the schooling system, because they are not able to cope with the demands of time, money and cultural capital, or because they do not fit with the educational preferences politically shaped by their local governments.

Values

If the foundation of life skills education is the cultivation of values, emergent and knowable values based on the harmonious integration of human complexity and intelligences, omni-actualized and self-reflective, then we must explore the values of the actual state of affairs that we are aiming to transcend as the metaphysical goal of life skills education.

First of all, I believe that we should recognize the degree of dependence that the educational system has had regarding the paradigm of modernity and how this paradigm has shaped the idea of ‘the profession’ of the teacher and the regularization of its practices. By paradigm I understand a systematic discourse or ideology that shapes our common way of seeing, perceiving and organizing reality, a structure of ideas that supports understanding and gives meaning to the world and our place in it (Moss, 2006, p.38). This particular paradigm of „regulatory modernity“ which has shaped the educational profession is represented by the technicist vision of a world that we can control, organize rationally, and predict because it is based in perfect decontextualized rules.

"the possibility of an ordered world, certain, controllable and predictable, based on universal, knowable and decontextualized criteria and laws; knowledge as an

objective mirror of the real world, acquired through reason and unaffected by values and politics; the separation of reason and emotion, one of many dualisms; and linear progress both for the individual and society" (Moss, 2006, p.38).

This world-view implies a set of values which give it validity and which legitimize its practices, such as: the ideal of domination and total control over natural sources and phenomena; the search for the maximum economic profit which institutionalizes the myth of the survival of only the successful ones; the desire of comfort and political hedonism; and the illusion of separateness that suppresses any human responsibility, focusing only on individual or national responsibilities depending on the interest and social capital of each particular agent.

This panorama was not to be intrinsically destructive if we, the humans alive today as participants and co-producer-consumers of the actual economic and eco-sustainable crisis, were not possessors of industrial and technological developments that have change the face of the world creating an ecological footprint and psychologically sick societies.

We must understand the social, historical and planetary changes of today from different perspectives, using all the tools that knowledge and professional expertise can give us. *"We are in desperate need of a broad historical system of interpretation to grasp our present situation"* (Sullivan, 1999, p.16). It is here where the praxis of life skills education, with the three pillars of sustainability, intercultural understanding and holistic well-being is of the utmost importance, because *"our present cultural story, exemplified in the technical-industrial values of western eurocentric culture, is now dysfunctional in its larger social dimensions even though we continue to believe in it firmly and act according to its guidance"*(Sullivan, 1999, p.16). We are in need of new paradigms that will transform our ways of living and will heal our lives and renew our ecosystems.

We may ask, however, which are the values that could form and shape our endeavors in this project of life skills education?

I know those values cannot be explained without experiencing them, but rather they are something that anyone ought to search by him/herself. I can suggest to search for a sense of justice which can makes us to feel worthy of

being alive and aware of our freedom and responsibilities. A search for truth in the sense of cultivating a relationship with reality based on the joy that comes from not fooling ourselves, and the dignity of not blindly accepting things or ideas that do not satisfy our internal feelings and intuition. A sense of self-awareness where we can find peace and rest from the expectations and undesirable desires that are shaping our personality through the avalanche of information that we receive every single day.

In brief, we are looking for the flourishing of wisdom in the form of an integral understanding of our complex life and the capacity to practise it and to live accordingly.

Transformative learning

„Virtutes discere vitia dediscere est: learning virtue is unlearning vices“
Seneca, Letters, L. 4. (Foucault, 1981, p.95).

By transformative learning I understand the principal feature of life skills education, because the aim is not instruction into a given structure but rather the development of attitudes and skills for creativity and adaptability to an ever changing dynamic social world. In this world, students are expected to design, implement and experience their original ways of life and capacity for participating soundly and with fairness in the political and social arena.

The questions are simple: What is the purpose of our life? Why are we studying and getting degrees? What is the use of knowledge? Do we need to be critics of ourselves and our institutions?

The answers are complex and depend ontologically on how earnest and sincere can we become in our own understanding and beliefs. It depends on the relationship between our contemporaneity and our place in the world.

It is easy for us to follow the dominant paradigms: the models of thought and behavior that support the contemporary modes of living, those structures of meaning - often taken for granted - that make us interpret reality in some way, which concomitantly shape our „personal“ cultures. But this is just one discourse, one interpretation, an ideology invented and developed by some kind of people, with some kind of interests, in order to implement and support

particular ways of living life and experiencing the world.

In the area of education this problematic about the influence that certain discourses have in shaping the life of human beings is very important, because it is through the educational system that such ideas and processes are implemented and cultivated in the young generations of new human beings. Through such process es continuity is reached and that is why any single student counts at the time of transforming culture through critical pedagogy and life skills.

I believe that the only way of really teaching something to someone is through an example of life. „*There is no word if it does not become embodied*“ said Raimon Panikkar (1985 p. 12), because there is something real that is behind words and of which words are symbols and expression: an understanding, a knowledge transformed in wisdom, in lifestyle, in risk and challenge assumed in existential practice.

Of course, someone could argue that practice without theory is useless and I will agree, but a theory is an epistemological structure of understanding that represents and points out to different layers within itself. When we limit theory to intellectual understanding without seeing that it is just an important step in the way of helping reason to guide the totality of our being in the access to deeper understanding, we miss the point and lose the opportunity to create something that will become alive and constitutive of our being and, hopefully, of our social being; that is - real transformative learning.

Our learning community needs to adopt as common endeavor, open minded research within the diversity of cultures and discourses, looking for the creation of new paradigms in the educational field, meaning the creation and adoption by professionals, practitioners and gradually further layers of society, of new ways of thinking and understanding the world and reality.

"the development of transformative professionals will depend on the emergence of leaders who are willing to be transformative themselves - to build trust, to take risks, to think critically and to act with integrity" (Mockler, 2005, p.743).

Thus, I propose the development of a new set of attitudes and practices that aim to renew the teaching profession in order to transform the educational universe, and through it, society and the future:

"A transformative teaching profession sees its primary responsibility in terms of

the development of critical, literate, socially aware citizens with a strong sense of their own civic responsibility, and through them the generation of social capital and the propagation of civil society" (Mockler, 2005, 738).

Nevertheless, even if this kind of transformation has an essential individual dimension as a function of self-awareness, will-power and judgment, it is true that without a community of ideas and effort, as well as the social capital that a self-aware learning community can generate in a society, nothing worthy can be done in order to transform the rigid structures that support and are dependent upon the actual state of affairs of our world, our eco-social crisis.

Therefore, the learning community should aim to create the structure for a common ground of interdependence and solidarity that will allow the effective application and flourishing of intercultural understanding in a very challenging and uncritical society full of power imbalances and mental inertia (prejudices, fears, selfishness, hedonistic conformity). Because a different set of paradigms will not appear out of thin air, there must exist a cultivated and fertile soil where its seed would find the possibilities of nourishment and care in order to grow and flourish:

"The development of a transformative teaching profession requires a reinstatement of trust, at both local and a global level, allowing teachers to act with autonomy, to openly acknowledge their learning needs and to work collaboratively with other teachers to constantly develop their understanding and expertise" (Mockler, 2005, p.742).

One of the most important of those new paradigms to work for and to cultivate within a learning community in the post-modern educational arena is the paradigm of the researcher. This paradigm is exemplified and presented exceptionally well in the educational approach of the world-famous Italian city of Reggio Emilia, which is seen widely as a prime example of 'glocalization': a local experience with a global influence and global connections (Moss, 2006, p. 36). Such a paradigm implies:

„... a habit of mind, an attitude, that can be developed or neglected. It is a response to curiosity and doubt. It constructs new knowledge, it makes for critical thinking, it is part of citizenship and democracy. Like everything else in Reggio, research is not a solitary activity, but a process of relationship and

dialogue“ (Rinaldi & Moss, 2004, p. 3). Furthermore, it demands the incorporation and embodiment of a particular set of values (Moss, 2006, p. 36-37), such as:

The understanding of knowledge, how it is constructed and its provisionality and relativity to specific contexts and micro-politics.

An openness to uncertainty and doubt as conditions for learning, discovery and amusement.

The awareness of the proper subjectivity and singularity of every point of view, and therefore a respect for diversity and the dignity of every person.

The responsibility for respect towards personal opinions and own decisions.

A willingness to open dialogue as *„a process of transformation where you lose absolutely the possibility of controlling the final result“* (Rinaldi, 2005, p.184).

And a disposition for listening, understanding it as the process of *„being open to others and what they have to say, listening to the hundreds (and more) languages, with all our senses“* (Rinaldi, 2005, p. 126).

The cultivation of this paradigm will provide our learning community with the dimensions of the learning enterprise that we are creating, giving us at the same time the necessary stamina and patience to realize and implement these new changes.

Holistic Well-being

„The teaching of well-being must have experience as its primary aim: we should be teaching the students how to be well, how to do well-being.“ (Morris, 2010, p. 4).

Holistic well-being constitutes the principal and fundamental principle of criteria in order to select the values, practices and politics that will create the structures of knowledge, the psychological dispositions and the spiritual attitudes for an improvement in the conditions of our contemporary world.

We should recognize that humanity is facing an enormous civilizational crisis, when the possibility of extinction is a great probability and when two thirds of humanity are experiencing war, hunger, hatred, stress and sickness as a

daily bread today (Panikkar, 1999, p. 146). Everybody is also aware that only some part of humanity is enjoying a nice and comfortable „beautiful“ life in their small suburban and urban ghettos --or institutionalized welfare countries-- where they can feel protected and secure against the wild life that is flourishing beyond their walls.

While by means of the amazing capacity of oblivion – the inertia of the mind (Panikkar, 2002)--, that make us to forget what is obvious, many people consent in continuing „democratically“ reproducing the state of affairs that has created such conditions by the exercise of putting their attention in what does not matters at all, in few words: „*The falling in the hedonistic indulgence of the very present moment by those who can egotistically allow it.*“ (Panikkar, 1999, p. 156). In contrast with the hedonistic focus on pleasure of our modern societies, we should understand happiness, following Aristotle as „*a long process of learning how to be fully human, learning how to flourish*“ (Morris, 2009, p. 25).

The problem is that every-single-day the majority of people of the world is pervade with thousands of advertisements that promote this lifestyle of comfort and oblivion, like a honorable goal and a privilege that just few will enjoy but that everybody must be longing for. Let's say it directly: such a lifestyle cannot be a well-being, even if my nation has the fortune of enjoying it for a while.

On the other hand, by holistic well-being I understand the possibility of being humanly free in the double sense of enjoying the authenticity of oneself and the auto-responsibility that every human has regarding existence as a whole. Freedom that is based on the daily exercise of taking care of the self-reflective consciousness attribute, the soul's capacity of knowledge and love, and the spiritual powers of will, desire and acting. Consciously accepting the honor of being the part of the universe that is aware of being aware and free for transforming the conditions of local universe and the world of life.

I would like to recall here the *Oration On the Dignity of Man* (1486) by Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) which constitutes a supportive metaphysical approach for the ideas that I am proposing here and that in the process of evolution of human consciousness represents elegantly the spirit of the Renaissance --a time from which we still have too much to learn--, and a

revolutionary conception of the self of the human being:

„Neither a fix abode nor a form that is thine alone nor any function peculiar to thyself have We given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and posses abode, what form, what functions thou thyself shalt desire. The nature of all other beings is limited and constrained within the bounds of laws prescribed by Us. Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will, in whose hand We have placed thee, shalt ordained for thyself the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world's center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world. We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer“ (Tarnas, 2006, 4).

I like very much this text because it represents the understanding of freedom as the personal responsibility of every person. We can assume that people differs in opportunities because of their social, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). But we can accept also that regardless the opportunities, each one has the same responsibility and chance of using his/her intelligences and conscious capacity for cultivate talents, perspectives and dreams. With this project of life skills I want to offer an educative framework that will contribute in this process of holistic well-being.

We can identify holistic well-being with the process of flourishing as human beings. In order to understand this complex process we should recognize that it implies an integral balance of the different dimensions that compound our lives. Ian Morris (2009) have defined six main satellites that can help us to approach this multidimensional balance:

Stillness: In the accelerated societies of today, we find a lot of pressure regarding the production and consumption of goods (knowledge, learning outcomes, working processes, fashion, information, and so on), that is why it is important to allow time for cultivating stillness, calmness, meditation; to dispose ourselves for being in the present moment and allow time to reflect on what have been done. *„The first step on creating an atmosphere of sustainable well-being*

in schools is to introduce periods of stillness into every school day“ (Morris, 2009, p.16).

Awareness: Once we are able of being in the present moment we can realize consciously the complexity and richness of our existence and of the world that is around and within us. Actually, an important part in the development of our multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) is the moment when we realize and become aware that we are using them. It is through this process of awareness that we can recognize the importance and functions of all phenomena within and without, and also appreciate them in a conscious, honest way. *“A person who is aware and who cultivates awareness not only understands who they are, but also takes the time to appreciate and understand who others are“ (Morris, 2009, p.16).*

Strengths: To discover together and independently our personal resources, interests and capacities, constitutes one of the more enjoyable practice for life skills education, as well as working for designing the practices that can help us to cultivate those strengths and to recognize and accept our limitations with patience and optimism. *„Education is all about our strengths: about finding out what we are good at and building our level of skill in those areas and stretching ourselves out into new areas that are as yet uncharted. At least, it should be.“ (Morris, 2009, p.20).*

Prudence: In order to be able to achieve anything we want or to realize any decision concerning ourselves, we need to have consistency and perseverance, as well as the ability of evaluating every step of the process that we are engaged on. That is why it is so important to cultivate this sense of soberness, this practical wisdom for keeping on in our endeavor with alertness and calmness. *„Practical wisdom involves taking a helicopter-eye view of your own life and recognizing areas that need a little attention. It takes as it first premise the idea that aspects of your life can be changed and encourages us to contemplate what we ought to change to make things go better.“ (Morris, 2009, p.20).*

Values: What we consider important for our lives, as essential and which make us feel worthy of being alive, is what I call the values of a person. Life skills education is about fostering learning environments where the awakening, critic and understanding of values like freedom, justice, truth, courage, empathy, compassion, patience, can be encouraged and practiced. *“Values are essential to a sense of well-being because they tie in with our understanding of our self and of our purpose in life and they inform our behaviours. If we do not have a carefully mapped out set of values, we are like a small boat being thrown about on a choppy sea. Values anchor us to meaning and they help to give purpose to our lives.”* (Morris, 2009, p.17).

Relationships: Everything in the universe is inter-connected, we are open systems in constant interchange with the outside world and thanks to self-consciousness we can cultivate also a relationship with ourselves. This condition of being related and in constant interdependence with others is what make us humans, fostering the soul's capacity for caring and love. *„Human life is about three basic relationships. Our relationship with ourselves, our relationship with others and our relationship with the outside world. To lead a happy life, we need to get these three relationships right and I would argue that in schools, the major agent of stress is people being unskilful in relationships.”* (Morris, 2009, p. 18).

On the other hand, during his lectures in the College of France in 1982, Michel Foucault introduced a historical and genealogical analysis about the Greek precept of *„one must take care of oneself- ephimeleia hauton“* which during the Roman season, the two first centuries A.D. it became to conform what was call the Art of living for the Stoicism and other philosophical schools of that period (Foucault, 1982).

Regarding this precept Foucault tell us that many practices where developed during that period in order to fulfil this philosophical requirement; and many of the well-being practices that we have today are part of that tradition. He describes these practices as a training process that does not have for object any professional skills but rather an individual preparation to cope with the challenges of everyday life:

„...to withstand in the right way all the possible accidents, misfortunes, disgrace, and setbacks that may befall him. Consequently it involves constructing an insurance mechanism“ (Foucault, 1982, p.94).

This insurance mechanism is one of the most important outcomes of life skills education because thanks to it, we can hold on in the practice of a healthy lifestyle. And we can be prepared to cope with the challenges and opportunities of our unique lives --circumstances, relationships, strengths and limitations--, with a serene and active consciousness, a caring attitude towards life in general, love for others and ourselves, and practical knowledge to participate impeccably in the local support of our self-regenerative universe (Buckminster Fuller, 1981).

As life is an ever changing event when we are always facing the dangers of falling on some kind of destructive behaviour or traumatic experience, thus we are in need of re-actualizing our insurance mechanism through the practice of a healthy lifestyle. That's why it is so important to cultivate life skills and of practicing them gradually since early age. Because children depend on adults while they develop their freedom, their consciousness and will-power, life skills education is about creating the right conditions for this development and to help adults to prepare themselves in their human responsibility towards all the children of the world.

Sustainability

„Only a comprehensive switch from the narrowing specialization and toward an ever more inclusive and refining comprehension by all humanity –regarding all the factors governing omnicontinuing life aboard our spaceship Earth—can bring about reorientation from the self-extinction-bound human trending, and do so within the critical time remaining before we have passed the point of chemical process irretrievability. Quite clearly, our task is predominantly metaphysical, for it is to how to get all of humanity to educate itself swiftly enough to generate spontaneous social behaviors that will avoid extinction“ (Buckminster Fuller, 1975, p. xxvii-xxviii).

Sustainability can be described as an imperative global goal for humanity as a

whole agent, independent of politic interests and cultural differences. This affirmation could appear to be a non sense, because there seems to be nothing within human affairs that is not influenced by politic interests and cultural differences. But today, we are living in a new reality that makes possible other ways of thinking, even if we are not yet aware of it. By this I mean that we are right now experiencing a transnational, intercultural and personal reality that did not exist thirty years ago: Globalization.

Many people have very different opinions about what globalization means, about the dangers and advantages, the power unbalances, the lost of cultures and identities, and so on (Yunus, 2006)... the risks are at stake. But the aspect that I want to give emphasis about globalization, as the reality that we are facing because of the complexity of our contemporary life, is the possibility of a planetary consciousness. By planetary consciousness I understand the awareness of being responsible citizens of our planet earth, being able to cope harmoniously with the needs, requirements and challenges for the support of regenerative life's equilibrium in our local-Universe (Buckminster Fuller, 1981).

We can imagine Sustainability as an alternative state of affairs different from Technocracy (Panikkar, 2002, p. 92-99), but being aware that both world's situations would find support in the phenomenological web of relationships which is globalization.

On the other hand, everybody can feel the urgent call for a new vision of ecology and for a general engagement in the change from destruction into regeneration of our social-eco-systems, because the earth is our physical and common nurturing matrix, for all the community of living beings.

"The well-being of the earth and the well-being of the human within the earth community, must be the central concern of education for the future, all the way from kindergarten to professional school" (Berry, 1999).

Moreover, this new ecology need to become the basic ground of solidarity among diversity and multiculturalism: „What if we were educated to nurture awareness of our inseparable relatedness?“ (Sullivan, 1999, p. 206). This awareness of relatedness and interdependence not only between humans but also between the earth's systems might become the key for the change of paradigms, accepting the human responsibility for all the power that we have

gained through knowledge development and scientific achievement.

Therefore, Sustainability should be understood first of all as a goal, as an state of affairs towards we must thrive personally and collectively.

„The personal benefits involved in embracing sustainability arise because wholehearted engagement with positive agendas like sustainability offers an increased sense of meaning and purpose in life and puts us in closer touch with our inner drivers“ (Murray, 2011, p.19).

There are many ways in which we can engage in the pursuit of Sustainability and life skills education has definitively an important role to play in fostering this human endeavor. Through the presentation of a variety of themes, the analysis of critical information and the creative production of possible solutions, our learning environments can become centers for Education in Sustainable Development:

„Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) aims to help people to develop the attitudes, skills, perspectives and knowledge to make informed decisions and act upon them for the benefit of themselves and others, now and in the future. ESD helps the citizens of the world to learn their way to a more sustainable future“ (UNESCO, 2005).

I consider that this pursuit of Sustainability is penetrating all spheres of life, and that everyday more people are becoming aware of their personal responsibility, and that through the practice of a conscious and healthy lifestyle, each one might contributes enormously in the process of Sustainable Development which, even in the most technological advanced societies, is a process that needs political, financial, social, industrial, ethical and personal compromise:

„Sustainable Development is a vision of development that encompasses respect for all life—human and non-human—and natural resources, as well as integrating concerns such as poverty reduction, gender equality, human rights, education for all, health, human security and intercultural dialogue“ (UNESCO, 2005).

With this definition in mind and the “*respect for all life –human and non-human- and natural resources*” as an universal value that we all can embrace, I consider that Sustainability should be approached as a multidimensional

paradigm which might connect very different ways of being sustainable, enabling us to use effectively the knowledge and information developed and acquired by different cultures, perspectives, and ways of life.

Interculturality

„Harmony is made of the union of multiple mixed things and the community of spirit of those who think in different ways“ Filolao de Crotona (Panikkar, 2002, p. 142).

Within the context of the life skills education that I am proposing I consider very important the cultivation of an intercultural understanding and the development of planetary consciousness and cosmopolitan citizenship, as the principal endeavour towards a harmonious integration between persons, groups, and cultures.

The main problematic regarding the relevance of interculturality in life skills education, is the problematic of values and interrelationships, the dynamics of unbalanced power relations that generate domination, discrimination, exploitation, injustice and poverty, but also misunderstandings, depression and stress, between different agents and groups. At the same time this problematic is affecting not only our personal well-being but the health and equilibrium of the whole earthly universe where we, humans, are just a single essential component.

While it is necessary that people engage with others regarding similar interests and talents, it is important also to encourage the awareness of earthian community and universal values that can be wide enough and important that everybody could be able to embrace and express them in very different and original ways. In this way people can become free from fear, hatred, misunderstanding, oppression, power obsession, by the integration of a human identity and earthian responsibilities within everyday life.

Life skills education aims to provide students with a progressive understanding of the developmental process of cultural identification in multicultural societies (Banks, 2007) which can be described as the process

towards cosmopolitan citizenship and planetary consciousness.

James Banks has designed a typology with the stages of cultural identification development in order to help teachers to recognize in their students on which position they are and therefore being able to guide them with awareness and a commitment to self-acceptance and clarification of their intercultural conflicts (Banks, 2007). Such typology is a very useful theoretical tool to analyze to some extent the complex process of cultural identification and through life skills education it could be possible to explore, design and develop ways for gradually evolve on such process.

It begins with the description of the first stage as "Cultural Psychology Captivity" where individuals have internalized the negative stereotypes of their social position and are captive in a self-rejection conflict. The second stage, "Cultural Encapsulation", describes individuals who tend to limit themselves to participate only in their cultural group. The third stage, "Cultural Identity Clarification" describes individuals who have clarified their personal attitudes and cultural identifications and because of it they can think positively upon their cultural groups. In the fourth stage "Biculturalism" individuals have reach a healthy level of psychological development which enable them to engage in different cultural frames (Banks, 2007, p. 159).

One stage further describes "Multiculturalism and Reflective Nationalism" as the stage where individuals have achieved clarified, reflective and positive attitudes and understanding within themselves and without towards different cultural groups and who are able to participate in the political life of their nation. The last stage "Globalism and global competence" is characterized by individuals who have reach the level of planetary consciousness and whose commitment is towards justice and all human beings in the world (Banks, 2007, p. 159).

In the case of marginal and minority groups, life skills can provide educational tools for the development of constructive marginality (Bennet, 1993) where people from different backgrounds can feel themselves and accept the others as equal participants within a multicultural society generating intercultural integration.

"The use of the term marginality is intended to indicate a cultural lifestyle at the

edges where two or more cultures meet" (Bennet, 1993, 114).

Janet Bennett defines the concept of cultural marginality as the condition of an individual who face psychological conflicts because of the internalization of different cultural frames which compete between them for attention and intrapersonal influence (Bennet, 1993, p.112). Thus, these conflicts represent a constant challenge for the marginal individual that imply a continual negotiation with a set of multiple and often complex factors (internal and external) in order to harmonize and make those conflicts a creative force that can help to evolve the person in her own process of cultural identification.

In the process of social development and personal maturity everybody has experienced moments of marginality, moments when our identity was questioned and decisions and negotiations within the person needed to be held and processed. The intercultural understanding and cosmopolitan consciousness that we are aiming to develop through life skills education can help students to deal with this internal conflicts in smoothly and intelligent ways.

Bennet (1993) makes a differentiation between two kinds of marginality that are very often interrelated in a dialectical manner, that is, it is possible for an individual to experience both states simultaneously in different domain-specific areas of his/her life, and both are also part of a dynamic of transformation and re-creation of identities, individually and in cultural groups.

"The encapsulated marginal is a person who is buffeted by conflicting cultural loyalties and unable to construct a unified identity. A constructive marginal is a person who is able to construct context intentionally and consciously for the purpose of creating his or her own identity" (Bennet, 1993, p. 114).

This approach is also very useful for understand some of the dynamics that influence the lives of immigrants and other different cultural groups that, because of multiple reasons, are experiencing or do have experienced marginality within the society where they live.

I consider the idea of constructive marginality one of those new paradigms that need to be encouraged and cultivated in schools and society, and which life skills education can work with, because it can become an educational approach that could empower students and other people in conditions of marginality with better understanding of their situation and a comprehension of

the opportunities that such conditions represent in a world increasingly diverse and interconnected. That's why I would like to add a quotation by Amartya Sen, a Nobel prize in Economics, which gives even more ground to the paradigm of constructive marginality and cosmopolitan citizenship:

"The same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a schoolteacher, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, a theater lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan, a jazz musician, and someone who is deeply committed to the view that there are intelligent beings in outer space with whom it is extremely urgent to talk (preferably in English). Each of these collectivities, to all of which this person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular identity. None of them can be taken to be the person's only identity or singular membership category. Given our inescapably plural identities, we have to decide on the relative importance of our different associations and affiliations in any particular context." (Sen, 2006, p. xiii).

This visualization of the multiple and diverse identities that one single person can have is very powerful because it suggests a critical relativity within the person whose identifications can change depending on which context s/he is situated in a given moment. Furthermore, the principal suggestion is that every individual needs to be aware of his/her own plural identities and willingly activating the ethical responsibility regarding the configuration chosen at any time (because this can happen unconsciously), and also strengthening the knowledge of how such decisions shape their lifestyles.

World-mindedness

During the course "Globalization in Education" at the University of Iceland in the spring semester of 2011, one of the most often used concepts by the teacher was "world-mindedness" as referring to the quality of mind and character that a person has acquired by living in different countries and experiencing different cultures. It describes the capacity of thinking world problems globally with an ethical commitment towards humankind in general and corresponds to a cultural

open mindedness that make such person able to think critical, to be flexible and respectful, and to have the capacity to understand and therefore communicate with others easily and consistently.

This conception complements and enrich some of the qualities of constructive marginality that can be understood as an awareness of *in-betweenness*: *"this awareness of living on the margins of at least two cultures eliminates being overly dependent upon a single culture for identity. Rather, individuals who are constructive in their marginality tend to experience wholeness and integration"*.(Bennet, 1993, p. 119).

Therefore within the context of cultural development and the need of transforming encapsulated and self-rejecting cultural marginalities in constructive ones with an endeavour for achieving a cosmopolitan identification, it is very important to foster learning communities that share such endeavour, otherwise the enterprise could become a lost war against discrimination.

Life skills education can enable more people to understand these concepts and also make that institutions, work places, and other social contexts become part of the learning environment towards a cultural integration where not only marginal groups can feel freedom and dignity, but also we would be able to count with more talents, knowledge, resources and intelligent behaviors for achieving Sustainability and holistic Well-being.

"Multiculturalism suggest that all citizens, no matter what their cultural background, should be able to contribute to a nation's cultural and economic development; and that it is the role of the government and its institutions to create conditions necessary to utilize their skills and talents, and thus be able to contribute to national development" (Rizvi, 2005).

But we know that this acceptance and open mindedness is a big challenge because within the governments many different powers are doing pressure for keeping the status quo which secure the so called „quality of life“ of few at the cost of the well-being of many. When will we understand that I cannot prize my quality of life when I know that other persons are hungry and afraid, and the earth's ecosystems degraded?

Nevertheless, everybody participates, consciously or unconsciously, in the process of developing their cultural identifications under the pressure of

globalization and everybody can contribute to the emergence of new paradigms illuminated by the planetary and ecological consciousness that is growing across the earth, and which life skills education aims to encourage and cultivate.

Conclusions

The last decades, modern education has been experiencing an ontological transformation in its structure, because of the eco-social crisis of values and modes of living that during the twentieth century became dominant in the world's self-image –globalization--, accelerating a process of technological and material development but without the wisdom to make such development sustainable.

Many scholars, thinkers and practitioners have been working to adapt educational methodologies for the challenges that this new era (some say After Hiroshima, others After Google) brings into the arena of social reality.

Life skills education participates in the endeavour of transforming education into the process of cultivating the necessary wisdom to cope with the responsibilities that our actions --as evolving humanity, and well informed citizens of the planet earth-- generate.

Our modern educational system based in the universalization of schooling and the reproduction of established role models, has in many ways participated actively in the present crisis, legitimizing injustice and institutionalizing the alienation of creativity and critical thinking.

At the same time, we need to become aware that we are inside the process of change, we are crossing borders between world-views, and therefore, we do not have yet complete the elaboration of the concepts, ideas, and structures of interpretation that might generate the emergence of the wisdom of living in the planet earth as an integrated human society, healthy, sustainable, intercultural.

The concepts of Sustainability, Interculturality and holistic Well-being, were selected by me as the three principal paradigms with which life skills education can work, with the aim of creating a spiritual and intellectual soil for growing the plants of planetary consciousness and cosmopolitan citizenship.

When I think about life skills, I consider that the question „*how to live a human life?*“ is at stake. What I know about human life is that it is an integral process of development in different dimensions, that does not have only one way of realization but rather a plurality of possibilities for evolution. Nevertheless this evolution is an evolution of consciousness through the wise processing of the experiences of life. That is why all real learning is transformative, because it implies an increasing of consciousness and therefore a transformation in the structure of oneself: the integrity of body, soul and spirit, manifested through our lifestyles.

To be unsustainable is a result of careless thinking, lack of vision, knowledge and love. Both: general and personally.

Interculturality consist in harmony, consciousness, inter-relatedness... in the special feeling of being at home in the whole world.

Holistic well-being is wisdom in action.

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A healthy lifestyle

An educational program on Life skills

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Introduction

The present program in Life Skills education is called 'A healthy lifestyle'. It is designed to fit different settings and ages. The program is based on the premises of holistic development of students as delineated in the principal curriculum for high schools education in Iceland (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 1999).

The curriculum states that the aim of Life Skills teaching should be to strengthen the students' all-round development and to encourage the student to become a person of great integrity. According to the curriculum this entails that the student develops a commitment to cultivate intellectual and spiritual values, physical health and psychological strength. The student should strengthen her/his social development, ethical intelligence and respect for oneself and others. Also, the aim should be to strengthen his/her initiative, essential creativity and adaptability so the student is able to confront the demands and challenges of daily life (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 1999).

I believe that education is a lifelong process that takes place in every experience that we have as living beings. It takes place in our interaction with others and through our perception of the meaningful spaces that we inhabit. The question then remains, what are we teaching others and what type of learning are we cultivating? What does it mean to be "a person of a great integrity that cultivates values and health"?

In my opinion, life skills education should focus on giving individuals some tools for fostering their own learning environment. It therefore follows that even though this program can be taught in schools as a life skills educational program, it can equally be considered as a program for informal education.

I would like to encourage the practice of informal education with the aim of breaking through the formalities of schooling and its power within the social structure, allowing more people to think differently and accept that other ways of learning and sharing knowledge are possible. This is especially pertinent in the

area of life skills where it is precisely the reflection and creative understanding of the experiences of everyday life which form the main material of learning; allowing not only students but everyone else to become a member of a wider learning community.

The main objective of this program is to create an atmosphere of transformative learning by providing students with tools that they can make use of in order to design and apply methods to approach life's challenges and opportunities. It is in this way that experiential learning becomes transformative; what is being taught is supposed to be practiced at any opportunity and in any context, instead of being something that we learn to get a degree and then forget later on (WHO, 1997). The program also seeks to contribute to the gradual achievement of the objectives proposed by the national curriculum for High Schools in Iceland (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 1999).

According to the curriculum each student should be able to:

- Cultivate empathy, solidarity and respect for other people's opinions and values in order to be able to have meaningful and caring relations with individuals, regardless of gender, sexuality, origin, religion and physical and emotional abilities.
- Show initiative in cultivating their creativity and adaptability in projects within and outside of the school environment. This entails for example that the student shows:
 - Original relational intelligence.
 - Resourcefulness in settings, events and challenges in new contexts.
 - Rational evaluation and deduction.
 - Critical thinking.
 - Courage to solve issues.
 - Initiative for action.
 - Responsibility for her/his own life, which includes taking a responsible stance towards drugs and medicine.
 - Consciousness about her/his responsibility as a consumer in a complex

society.

The paradigmatic core of this program is the triad Interculturality, Sustainability, and holistic Well-being, which, influenced by Capra (1983), I consider to be important paradigms for a transformation of the eco-social crisis that is pervading the earth nowadays and which is threatening life as a whole:

“Indeed, our experience of feeling healthy involves the feeling of physical, psychological and spiritual integrity, of a sense of balance among the various components of the organism and between the organism and its environment. This sense of integrity and balance has been lost in our culture.”(Capra, 1983, 248).

I believe that well-being for all humanity is possible if each person takes part in the human endeavour of cultivating justice, caring, and mindfulness. The methodology that we will use is a combination of theory and practice. The theories that we will discuss will be approached by exploring different forms of expression developed in diverse cultures and historical times, accessing them through the internet, books, and other sources such as souvenirs, architectural designs and so on.

The mode of evaluation will be based on participation and engagement, as well as the feedback that will come out of group conversations. Grades will not be given. The leader will present an approach and then will guide a discussion about how students interpret it. The practical exercises will be introduced as examples by the leader but with the awareness of encouraging creativity and therefore with open-mindedness for discovering better ways to explore the ideas in discussion as a group.

Some basic tools

There are some basic methodological tools that are used in the program. By using them and practicing them, I believe that we could understand with greater ease the life skills which I would like to encourage and integrate into our lives.

These abilities or tools are:

1. **Problem solving:**

Is an intellectual technique or process for facing any kind of problem. The basic steps for problem solving are: „1) *Define the problem*; 2) *think of all the different kinds of solutions to the problem*; 3) *weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of each*; 4) *chose the most appropriate solution and plan how to realise it*“(WHO, 1997).

2. **Brainstorming:**

A technique for sharing ideas and suggestions in order to co-construct knowledge and encourage critical thinking and the ability to make careful associations and form a relational way of thinking. In this instance, any topic or phenomenon can be explored through engagement in brainstorming games. For example, a question is proposed regarding any issue of interest and then every one of the participants is asked to give an idea or suggestion of how he/she can interpret, understand or resolve that issue. Usually people share just words or short phrases that will stimulate their thinking capacities. All the suggestions are listed and analysed through conversation, within which an attempt is made to co-construct knowledge and to become aware of the reasons why we think as we do as well as what information we class as valid or irrelevant for approaching such issues, and from where this is derived (WHO, 1997).

3. **Role play**

A technique that uses elements of theatre and the histrionic and expressive abilities of students to re-create situations of reality in order to experiment

and explore different behaviours, reactions and attitudes.

„In role play, various aspects of the same situation can be explored, and the students involved can be given a chance to try out the life skills they are being taught. Role play can be of considerable value for dealing with sensitive issues that may cause anxiety in real encounters. The learner can observe and practice ways of behaving in a safe, controlled environment before facing real-life situations “(WHO; 1997).

4. Conversation

It is an art. Through conversation we engage in communication with others thanks to the technology of language. In order to enter in conversation, according to Jeffs and Smith (1993), we must be aware of the other's feelings, thoughts, gestures; we must give space for the other to express him/herself, *“it needs to be a reciprocal process”* (Jeffs & Smith, 1996, 29-31).

According to Ronald Warhaugh (1985) one must have a maturity of feeling about what can be said or not in a conversation as well as when is the right moment to speak or to remain silent. Warhaugh reminds us that this “feeling” is a kind of emotional wisdom or intelligence, a kind of intuition that is present all the time helping us to choose the right words at the right moment. We should also be in possession of an historical knowledge that makes it possible for us to follow what we have said with the right gestures and body language as well as being able to read the same from others (Jeffs & Smith, 1996, 29-30).

As teachers of life skills education we need, in order to use conversation as an intelligent tool for the co-construction of knowledge and mutual discovery of our potentialities and weaknesses, keep an open-mindedness that will allow us to listen to the other's perspectives and also to change our own points of view. We have to be able to consider something new and to be open to different alternatives that we may not have previously encountered. Yet, if we are fair and honest, we will also gain knowledge from this process. They also add that at the same time we should be constantly alert to cope

with power unbalances and untruthfulness during our educational conversations. Finally, we should be aware that:

„We are clear about what is being said; the truth of statements; the sincerity of the people speaking; whether what is said fits the situation” (Jeffs & Smith, 1996; 32-33).

5. Processing questions

This refers to the ways we are able to structure the flow of the conversation by trying to organize what has been said and to direct it towards the co-construction of knowledge by asking the right questions in order to illuminate the different dimensions of any issue that we are dealing with. These questions for processing information are:

“What?: What is the lesson about?

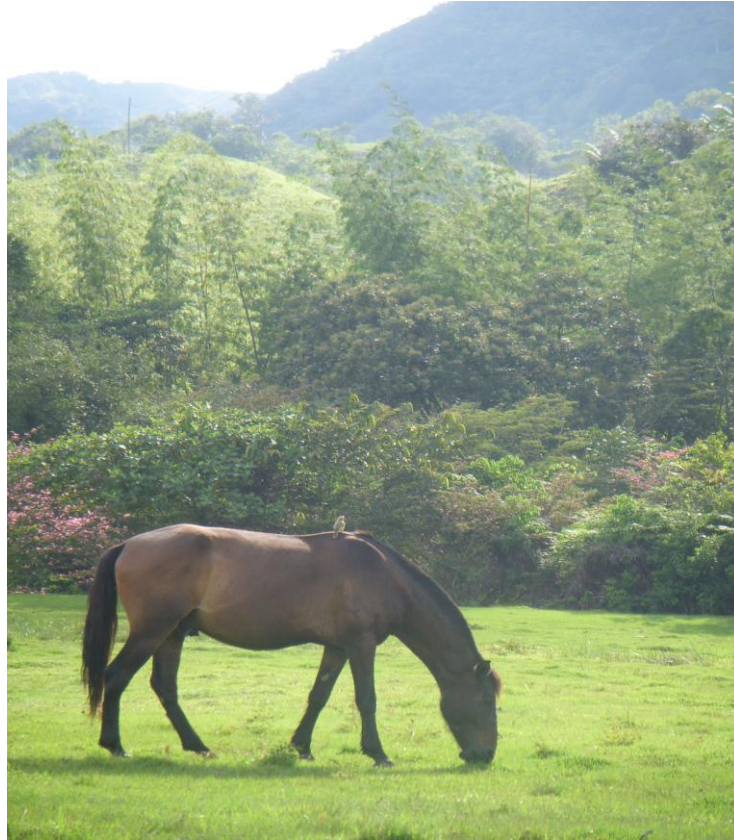
So what?: What have I learnt from the lesson? What thoughts and feelings did the lesson stimulate?

Now what?: What can I do with what I have learned/experienced? How can I apply it to my everyday life? “ (WHO, 1997).

These 5 basic tools (problem solving, brainstorming, role play, conversation and processing questions) should be cultivated and actively used throughout the course. I consider them very important for their flexibility and neutrality, because they can be used in any situation and in differing degrees of difficulty, and further more, that they are applicable in different publics and settings. We can call them epistemological or logical life skills and they are essential tools because, as I suggested before, through their use we can progress in the development of more complex and interesting qualities and capacities in our students.

A healthy Lifestyle

Life skill course program



Guidelines

I consider that a healthy lifestyle is the art of **taking care** of the balance of forces and processes that make up the human being as a whole integrity of life.

This program is about exploring some techniques and theories that could encourage and foster the cultivation of a healthy lifestyle. It focuses on the harmonious integration of body-soul-spirit --which constitutes the 'being' of the human being-- allowing individuals to design their own lifestyle in correspondence with practical knowledge that has been developed for humanity

throughout ages and cultures.

By 'body' I understand the complex of physical, biological, chemical, perceptual and energetic systems that comprises the human organism. The soul – mind-- can be described as the psychological frame of the person: thoughts, emotions, memory and intuition, as well as the different aspects of intelligence or multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993). I understand 'spirit' to mean the whole complex of qualities and values that make human existence something worthy of living: justice, truthfulness, honesty, compassion, honour, freedom, and so on; as well as the intentions, attitudes and purposes that give meaning to human life.

I hold the belief that in our contemporary time of cross-border integration, when we are becoming more aware of what is happening all around the world and accessing different kinds of information and experiences from very diverse countries and cultures, the wisdom that has been gained for humanity in general is an earthly heritage which belongs to everybody.

The program is divided into six principal areas which are inter-connected and complementary. Each area includes the introduction of some basic ideas and gives examples of how to practice them. It is important that the educational setting –formal or informal- has clear space and a tranquil atmosphere. Furthermore, a computer with internet access and a projection set is required. Participants should be in good health and injury free, and wear comfortable clothes to each session. In the case of disability the program can be adapted to fit individual needs.

Each area has a duration of two hours of learning practice, plus one hour of reflection, conversation and feed-back, in order to co-construct knowledge and foster transformative learning. For flexibility, these three hours can be divided into: one hour/three days; two hours- one hour/two days; or three hours/one day, depending on the time available and the interest of the participants. In total the program has a duration of 18 hours which can be presented in different ways depending on the settings, time availability and social conditions of the participants. For example, in schools for children between 12-16 years old, the program can be held in a model of 3 hours/week

with a total of 9 weeks. For teenagers between 16-22 years old, the program can be held in a model of 6 hours/week with a total of 3 weeks. For adults older than 22 years old, the program can be held as a weekend workshop of 6 hours/day, with the opportunity of more intensive and practical engagement in the transformative learning experience. I also believe that this program can provide understanding and professionalism for practitioners and educators interested in working with life skills.

Modules

- Meditation & Mindfulness
- Regular exercise
- Getting enough sleep
- Good diet
- Harmony with the outside world
- Earth our homeland

Meditation and Mindfulness



Ideas for classes

1. Meditation

Meditation can be defined as the state of being when our awareness is still and balanced. A spontaneous harmonization of the whole structure of the being (body-soul-spirit) begins to flourish and a joy of existence in the present moment without outer stimuli is the most clear signal of progress.

- **Exercise:** sit comfortably with a straight back, close the eyes and breathe slowly and consciously. Allow the mind to rest and let the thoughts that may arrive pass by. Focus on the breathing and feel the air flowing throughout the body, relaxing and making it present. Feel the presence of the mind in the body, in each part of it. Enjoy existing in this very moment.

2. Tridimensionality of the human being (body-soul-spirit)

This approach sustains that these three dimensions are inter-related and that, even if we can distinguish them in order to fostering understanding, we cannot separate them because together they constitute our whole being. Without their inter-relationship there is no human being. Each one deserves respect and

conscious caring.

- **Topics of study and discussions:**

1. What is the body? How can we approach the complexity of the human body?

Example: the body in the Renaissance (sculptures, medicine, philosophy); the body today (fashion, media, yoga).

2. What is the soul? How can we understand its different aspects and dimensions?

Example: A North-American aboriginal vision of the soul (stories); Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences.

3. What is the spirit? How can we understand that there is more in the world that we can be conscious of without being able to explain it rationally?

Example: Indian mythology, Einstein biography, Vincent van Gogh art.

Notice: the aim is to explore these topics and to connect them with experiences of everyday life and with students' intuition and interpretation. After a while the focus will be on students' interests in a developmental process of discovering.

3. Mindfulness

We can define mindfulness as meditation in action, which means the active state of mind wherein we are aware of thoughts, actions and reactions within ourselves and with an attitude of soberness and alertness that allows us to explore and discover the complexity of the present moment without judging or condemning ourselves.

Ian Morris tells us of his educational practice that „ *In the informal surveying that I have done of the students attitudes to their well-being lessons, one thing consistently comes out on top as the favourite thing that they have learned: mindfulness.*“ (Morris, 2010, 181).

- **Exercise:** How can we feel and understand the interrelationship of the three dimensions of the human being?

Let's dance and move by listening to different kind of music; and we can learn also, while watching the videos of the songs selected, about how different cultures have related with their holistic being. Music is a great example of this tridimensionality, because it incorporates the body to play it, dance it and feel it. It requires the soul to interpret it, understand it, remember it and enjoy it; and it calls on the spirit to create it and give it a transcendental and social meaning. Let's take samples from Africa, America, Europe, Oceania, and Asia.

Let's discover and cultivate our multiple intelligences: corporal, emotional, musical, critical, intercultural and spiritual whilst paying attention to our movements, our breathing, the feelings, thoughts and emotions that arouse whilst practicing it, in one single expression. Let's prepare together a map with our discoveries.

Let's find ways to practice mindfulness while we are doing basic chores or going on with our daily routine.

Regular exercise



In the process of designing a healthy lifestyle we can explore and choose different ways of exercising ourselves. It does not mean that we should practice some specific sport. What we should encourage is for students to cultivate a harmonious balance between

the three dimensions of being in order to cope better with the challenges of everyday life. Exercise is a way to do it as it can bring the practitioner the joy of being in movement and to feel the energy flowing through the whole body. The body is the instrument of all human realizations and it must be treated accordingly.

Ideas for classes

1. Auto-massage

Is a massage technique that activates energy flow in the body and releases tensions and stress. It can be practiced by anybody at any age. It takes approximately 15 minutes to learn it and 5 minutes to practice every day, improving the energetic balance in the physical system.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTxuPVyAXn0>

2. Sun salutation (Surya namaskara)

Is a yogic technique which includes physical postures, breathing exercises and awareness. It can be practiced by anyone with good basic health.

„The obvious characteristic of surya namaskara is the fact that it exercises the entire body. The back is bent forwards and backwards, the arms and legs are bent and straightened, the abdomen is compressed, stretched and so on. It is an integral exercise that influences the health of the whole body“ (Satyananda, 1981, 141).

This technique represents an integral exercise for the whole being because while working on the body, it helps to focus the mind and to train the attention, and gives meaning and purpose to our spiritual values and life.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLv3-YrvyY&feature=related>

- **Exercise:** What do you think? Any comments? How do you feel? Do you think it is important? Why/ why not?

Let's practice again slowly and with all our senses and mind concentrated on what we are doing.

Let's review what we have learned until now.

Getting enough sleep



To sleep is not only necessary but fundamental, that is to say it is through sleep that all our being regenerates itself, renewing its energies and releasing naturally all the knots and tensions of everyday life. It is a natural way of relaxation but in our modern societies it is

more and more difficult to sleep well and to relax, which is why when we wake up the next day we feel tired. What is more, it is important to prepare ourselves for dreaming and to learn from this natural processing of emotional information and knowledge.

Ideas for classes

1. Relaxation technique (shavasana)

Shavasana is a yogic technique that helps to relax and clarify the mind and body. Lay down on the floor over a clean and soft surface, the palms of the hands facing up, arms a little separated from the body, and legs separate from each other. Breathe deeply and slowly focusing on the movement of the air within the body for a while, and then breathe normally. Next, begin to focus on each part of the body, beginning with the fingers and ending at the toes on each side of the body, and then all the vertebral column, inner organs, neck and head. When we focus on each part we imagine how through breathing we are releasing tensions and stress, feeling the earth holding all of our weight. Finally we feel the body as a whole supported by the earth, without tension, relaxed, free.

2. Reviewing the day and becoming at peace with the world

This is an antique technique that was used by sages since time immemorial. It consists of, every night before sleep, taking approximately five to ten minutes to review the day that has passed by, analysing and evaluating behaviours, attitudes, feelings and thoughts that were experienced, recognizing when one was aware and when not, and trying to observe retrospectively and non-judgementally but with the aim of learning from the mistakes and good deeds that are now consciously being reviewed.

- **Exercise:** through role playing each person can choose a character from a story or movie, and try to imagine reviewing the day for such a person.

3. Let's talk about dreaming: to dream is a natural process that, because we cannot control it, many people avoid talking about or give little importance to. We propose to explore dreaming through art, science and religion and to discuss our own experiences. This is important because through dreams our emotions find a way of expression and they can be a great tool in the development of emotional intelligence.

A good diet



As human beings we are dynamic organisms, always transforming and regenerating, always in constant interchange and interdependence with our environment. A normal person can live without food for more or less 40 days, without water for 2 weeks, without heat or fire for

5 days, and without air just a few minutes (Chandra Swami, 1969). Why, then, are we not constantly aware of such an extremely important dependence?

Ideas for classes

1. Balanced diet

There is a popular wisdom which says that „*we are what we eat*“, and that is true in such a way that all the things that we ingest into ourselves become part of our cells through the process of digestion and transformation that occurs automatically in our organism. At the same time all of the substances that we eat, or breathe or ingest mentally influence our whole structure physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually.

- **Exercise:** The importance of a balanced diet: what do we understand by a wholesome meal?
- We can introduce here the concept of Sustainability, because the meaning of a wholesome meal is based on all the connections that such concept implicates today.
- As perceptual beings, we can agree that we consume not only food but information, emotions and other forms of energy. Let's explore

the different kinds of energy that feed our whole being. Which kind of food do we prefer, how organized or chaotic is our living environment, what are our more frequent thoughts, where they come from, which are our ways of recreation, what are our most important relationships?

- Let's explore our garbage in order to find out which kinds of waste we produce and to discover recycling possibilities.
- Avoidance of toxins: let's explore about the different kinds of contamination that is threatening our well-being in one single day. Let's make a map of this exploration.
- Let's discover the hidden curriculum (Eisner, 1994) in our surroundings and how it influences us. Let's compare different schools architecture and school room's designs; also let's look at the advertisements, combination of colors and other symbols that are in the different sites within our schools.



Harmony with the outside world



One of the most important tasks of any conscious person is to weave humanity, meaning to create and re-create a caring relationship based on the marriage between knowledge and love, not just with human beings but also other living creatures and phenomena that together comprise the universe.

Ideas for classes

1. The window metaphor. Intercultural understanding.

We are all different but at the same time we share many things, in fact we are inter-independent, which means that while having a limited freedom of action we are dependent upon others to find safety in our freedom, and dependent upon our environment for survival and in learning to harmonize our energies whilst concomitantly being responsible for them.

In the next link we find a small conference by Raimon Panikkar (2010) talking about the window metaphor, as an example of intercultural dialogue:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kvsov6OuTWs>

- **Exercise:** Let's express our feelings regarding others (parents, friends, acquaintances, foreigners) using drawings, music, dance, writing, role-play and brain storming. We can choose a tale or story and make a play of it, then discuss and analyse what feelings it awoke in us, which ideas, thoughts, memories...

Earth our Homeland



The purpose of this section is to contribute to the awakening of a planetary consciousness by focusing on education in earthly citizenship.

The value of this study consists in the urgency and extreme importance of a paradigmatic shift that will allow the

transformation of human societies towards integration in diversity and the affirmation of life on earth. This includes an education for all based on the topics of complexity and multidimensionality of reality and human beings:

- An anthropological conscience: unity in diversity, homo sapiens-demens.
- An ecological conscience: we all share the biosphere, we are nature.
- An earthly civic conscience: solidarity and responsibility, earth citizenship
- A spiritual conscience of the human condition: complex thought, self-criticism and inter-understanding (Morin, 2001).

Ideas for classes

1. Poli-identity: the cosmopolitan person

"The same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a schoolteacher, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, a theatre lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan, a jazz musician, and someone who is deeply committed to the view that there are intelligent beings in outer space with whom it is extremely urgent to talk (preferably in English). All of these collectivities, to each of which this person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular

identity. No one alone can be taken to be the person's only identity or singular membership category. Therefore, given our inescapably plural identities, we must decide on the relative importance of our different associations and affiliations in any particular context."(Sen, 2006, xiii).

Exercise: let's explore and make a list of our multiple identities. Let's share our list with our peers, and maybe we can practice role play to get better understanding of them for others.

2. Identifying the obstacles.

- Despite their solidarity human beings are enemies to each other.
- Human beings do not know how to give birth to humanity.
- Understanding cannot be digitalized.
- Too much contamination and no time to purify ourselves or our environments.
- Hedonistic comfort, drugs, indifference, egocentrism, ethnocentrism.
- **Exercise:** Let's critically analyse each one of these obstacles and attempt to discover the conditions of their existence. Are there may be more obstacles?

3. What is it to succeed in life?

Ralph Waldo Emerson defines success as: *"To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty, to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better; whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you lived. This is to have succeeded."*

- **Exercise:** Write down what you think is or are the purposes of your personal life, what meanings do we have for our lives, which values you

consider important to cultivate within yourselves and in society, and what can we imagine to be a good lifestyle and why?

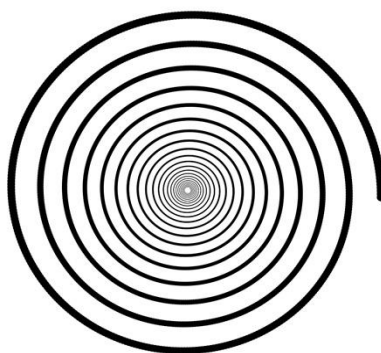
- Let's make a map to recognize in which purposes and values we coincide and in which not. Let's talk about it.

Conclusions

This program constitutes an endeavour to explore theories and ideas that I believe are urgent and fundamental, and deserve intelligent consideration for any conscious human being because of the conditions that we find ourselves living in at the beginning of the twenty first century.

We know today that humanity and the world are facing many dangers and challenges, and to solve them we need the help of all the abilities, capacities, points of view and intelligences that everyone can cultivate following her/his personal intuition, desires and interests. However, at the same time this should be done under the guidance of integral paradigms such as Interculturality, Sustainability and holistic Well-being. With the present program and the theoretical frame that supports it, I wish to contribute towards the integral development of this new educational approach as represented by life skills education, which, I believe, can create an experiential ground of knowledge for the metaphysical transformation of our civilization.

I consider the present program as a “beginners’ manual” because all the ideas introduced are very complex and deserve a gradual development. The image that I use to describe the use of this program is the natural and symbolic phenomenon of the spiral, the vital cycle that expands vertically towards a more comprehensive and qualitatively higher maturity of consciousness.



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